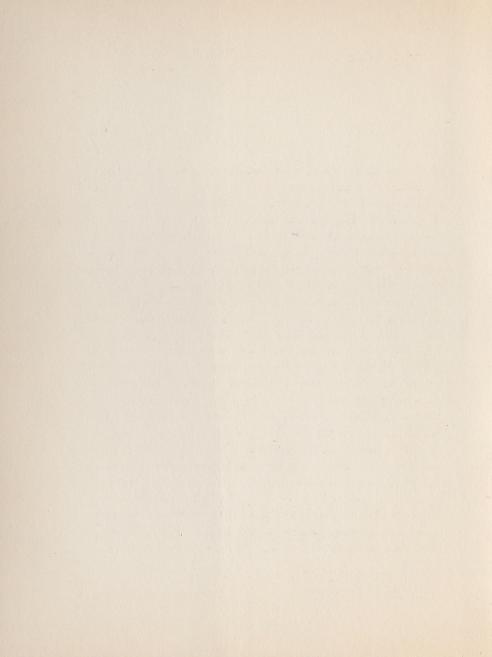
~ Σ 4 S = Z Z 4 4 ш I



# POPULAR IMAGES AND SENSIBILITY

JULY 2 - SEPTEMBER 15



By the late fifties a number of British and American artists had independently begun to make art which had as its subject matter images borrowed from the popular and commercial world of advertising, comic strips, supermarkets, and ''modernistic'' interior design. Lawrence Alloway, a British critic involved with the development of the Pop movement in England, has remarked that at that time ''Hollywood, Detroit, and Madison Avenue were, in terms of our interests, producing the best popular culture.''

In a certain sense, this development was a long anticipated reaction against the esoteric and expressionistic abstract art that had been dominant since World War II. It was clearly a return to the outer world of visual reality, only, to the chagrin of those who had eagerly awaited this return, it revealed a world much changed since artists such as Vermeer, Chardin, Renoir, and Bonnard had described a comfortable and tasteful bourgeoise ambience and Jan Steen, Hogarth, Toulouse-Lautrec, and even Reginald Marsh had depicted roistering scenes of low-life in taverns, cafes, brothels, and burlesque theaters. Attempts to recreate such scenes would not have been realism but romanticism laced with nostalgia. The Pop artists were not interested in such quixotry. They entered bluntly into an area that clearly typified the post-war American world: the arena of commercial, popular culture. They used subjects scorned by the cultural elite as vulgar and trite. At first it was assumed by many that the artists must be satirizing

the subjects they chose. But it soon became evident that far from being angry and aggressive these artists were cool, detached, hip. They were not attacking or condemning what they portrayed, they were revealing it and even embracing it.

They carried realism beyond an accurate description of the visual material world. Instead of depicting scenes in which billboards, signs, or cafeterias played a part, as artists such as Edward Hopper had long been doing, images of billboards, comic strips, interiors of stores or homes actually became the entire work of art. The comic strip panel or spot advertisement filled the entire canvas and sections of supermarkets and homes were constructed as environments. Thus, the subject and the work of art were identical. Realism could hardly be carried farther than this.

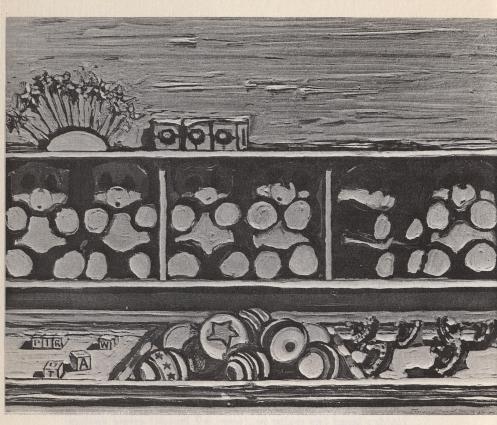
In choosing the world of popular, commercial art, the artists opted for impact over nuance. This was an area in which subtleties of drawing, composition, color, texture, and brushstroke were replaced by flat, printed surfaces and bold, if often crude, designs. Thus, implicit in "Pop Art" is a rejection of values traditionally associated with "high," or "serious" art.

Despite this anti-sensibility posture, however, the best work by these artists inevitably carries with it the same paradoxical implication inherent in the ostensibly anti-art position of Dadaism: that sensibility will invariably triumph over matter, whether this be rubbish picked up in the street (Kurt Schwitters), objects found in dime stores (Marcel Duchamp), or vulgar and banal subject matter.

The immediate genesis of the American Pop Art movement is located mainly in the work of two men: Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg. By the mid-fifties both of these artists were working with a "painterly" technique related to that of painters such



Jasper Johns, Map.



Wayne Thiebaud, Toy Counter.

as de Kooning, Hofmann, and Guston. Unlike the Abstract-Expressionists, however, they both turned outward to the material world to find images for the subjects of their works rather than inward to their own subconscious. Rauschenberg, probably inspired by Joseph Cornell's boxes, combined painted surfaces with actually existing objects such as stuffed birds and animals and rubber tires. Johns chose to paint images that were so common that they had become cliches, for example: alphabets, targets, numbers, flags, and maps. These are all normally two dimensional with sharply defined edges. Johns was the first to have these images fill the surface of the canvas (rather than treating them as an element in a scene in suggested space) so that the identity of the painting is synonymous with that of the object. Although this artist often used stencils to help define such images as letters and numbers, the over-all character of his painting has always remained sensuous and painterly. Thus, Johns has, in a sense, reversed the Abstract-Expressionist attitude. The older artists aimed to reveal content through form, while Johns has nullified the meanings inherent in the specific signs and symbols that he has depicted. He tells a banal "story," but with such eclat and a masterly painting technique that the subject is sometimes recognized only with surprise.

Most of the original Pop artists were inspired by the idea of using commonplace subjects but they elected to adopt the look as well as the images of commercial art. Warhol, Wesselman, Lichtenstein, Rosenquist, and most of the artists related to them, deliberately mimicked the flat, prosaic surface of their commercial subjects. Lichtenstein went so far as to imitate the "ben-day" dots of the printer, on an enlarged scale. However, Claes Oldenburg, one of the original Pop artists of the New York group, and Wayne Thiebaud, a painter of popular images from the West Coast, have,

in a sense, followed Johns' lead in demonstrating great regard for the sensuous character of materials, textures, and surfaces.

Thiebaud was born in Mesa, Arizona, in 1920. He is now teaching at the University of California's Davis campus and lives in Sacramento. Until recently he dealt largely with images, often repeated many times in the same picture, of American foodstuffs such as rows of cakes, pies, barbequed chickens, bowls of creamed soups, and stick candies. He has also painted yo-yos, pinball machines, gumball machines, lipstick tubes, and other popular articles uniquely common to the American scene. More recently he has painted figures, sometimes life-size. In all cases he creates a rich, thick, buttery surface related to that of the California Bay Area school and such painters as Diebenkorn and Bischoff. Figures are normally isolated against a flat ground, bathed in an even, sterile light, and modeled with strong darks and lights with clearly delineated cast shadows. The atmosphere--both physical and psychological--bears a strange affinity to that appearing in the proto-Surrealist paintings of Giorgio de Chirico more than fifty years ago. An ominous silence and a peculiar sense of the absence of human will and intelligence seems to be suggested.

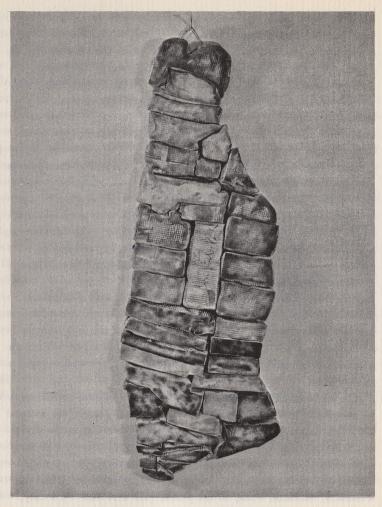
Except for the few paintings by de Chirico in which biscuits, bananas, or fish appear, however, Thiebaud's subjects are entirely different from the Italian artist's, as is his technique. The cakes that he paints appear to be made of that peculiar mixture of "plaster" and sugar favored by assembly-line bakeries; the chickens are stark images of cruelly burnt flesh; the girls are bovine; and the male figures are sullen or vaguely troubled. The repeated images of cakes, wedges of pie, lipsticks, or toys, create complex and interesting patterns with varied relations among objects that are all presumably the same. Further, the shapes of the spaces

between these objects are equally interesting in design and play an important role in the over-all surface pattern. Above all he is apparently concerned with making the oil paint simulate as exactly as possible the texture and character of materials. "Meringue," he has remarked, "and marshmallows are gorgeous materials, they are so sticky and drippy and very close to the consistency of oil paint." Thiebaud is clearly concerned with formal problems of composition, color, and texture as well as the objects that serve as his icons

Claes Oldenburg graduated from Yale and studied at the Chicago Art Institute. After moving to New York in 1956, his primary concern shifted from painting to sculpture.

Oldenburg's art reveals an extreme sensitivity to the ambience of his surroundings. Both *The Street* and *The Store*, environments which he constructed, came directly out of his experience of New York--a city that he called "diagonal and free" in contrast to Chicago which he considered "rectangular." "The Street," he said, was a metaphor for line. The Store became a metaphor for color." The Home, which he declared was "a metaphor for volume," developed out of a stay in California. He thus reveals sensitivity to--and concern for--abstract form and at the same time effectively refutes the idea that "Pop Art" is necessarily empty of metaphor.

The environments are major works in which objects constructed of materials such as plaster, canvas, and vinyl plastic are assembled to create full-scale settings in stores, lurid California-style bedrooms, etc. In addition to such assemblages, however, he has also created individual objects: ray guns, hamburgers, ice-cream cones, shoestring potatoes, catsup bottles, typewriters, light switches, toasters, a map of the postal zones of New York City,



Claes Oldenburg, Soft Manhattan #1 (Postal Zones).

drum sets, and many more. These are images common to the contemporary American scene, but invariably created with real concern for the singular character of the subject and for the materials from which the work of art is made. Oldenburg has remarked: "I'm not terribly interested in whether a thing is an ice-cream cone or a pie and so on . . . The fact that I wanted to see something flying in the wind made me make a piece of cloth, the fact that I wanted to see something flow made me make an ice-cream cone." However, he violates the nature of the subject when it suits his purpose. With a sense of both form and the absurd he makes sculptures of toasters, typewriters, drum sets, and other metallic or hard plastic objects out of stuffed canvas and similar soft materials. These bulge and sag, changing shape whimsically at a touch. Sometimes he makes "ghost" maquettes, out of rough canvas streaked with flat white paint, for finished works which are made from materials such as shiny, smooth, highly colored vinyl. It seems clear that Oldenburg, like Johns and Thiebaud, is not just concerned with the images that he uses, he is also involved with formal qualities. He reveals exceptional sensitivity to the character and relationships of materials, shapes, textures, and colors. And it is precisely in the often paradoxical relationship established between the image and the form of the works where the poetry of this extraordinary art exists. Oldenburg has commented: "I am for an art that takes its form from the lines of life, that twists and extends impossibly and accumulates and spits and drips and is as sweet and stupid as life itself," and, "If I didn't think what I was doing had something to do with enlarging the boundaries of art, I wouldn't go on doing it."

Finally, the frequently heard question of whether Pop Art is

really art is simply irrelevant. When the history of the art of this particular time is written, Pop Art will occupy more or less space depending on the quality of the work the artists have produced. Like all significant art, at least some Pop Art has caused us to see our world somewhat differently than we did before. It has even influenced certain obvious changes in that part of the world that it has staked out as its special preserve. "Feedback" may be the appropriate term to describe its influence on commercial art. But when the conditions that have provided the images for Pop Art have passed out of existence, the only relevant question will be how good are these works as art? What value will they have for the citizens of a somewhat different world? Works by Chardin, Goya, Courbet, and Daumier retain the power to move us profoundly even though the social contexts out of which they grew, and which they mirror, are gone. Yet, by virtue of their formal qualities and their depiction of images that reflect not just superficial aspects of their world but broadly human values, they remain relevant. Will any of the Pop artists have a similar staying power? An educated guess is that even if the future should find their iconography obscure, works by Johns, Thiebaud and Oldenburg will remain rewarding for their formal qualities and particularly for their remarkably sensitive use of materials.

Edward B. Henning
Curator of Contemporary Art

## WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

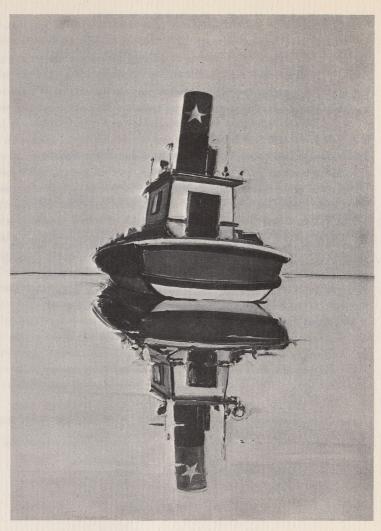
JASPER JOHNS
Map, oil on canvas, 1963, Anonymous loan

#### WAYNE THIEBAUD

Booth Girl, oil on canvas, 1964, lent by Allan Stone Gallery, New York

Cakes #4, pastel, 1967, lent by Allan Stone Gallery
Delicatessen Trays, oil on canvas, 1961, lent by Allan Stone
Gallery

Greg, oil on canvas, 1964-65, lent by Allan Stone Gallery
Penny Machines, oil on canvas, 1961, lent by Allan Stone Gallery
Pinball Machines, oil on canvas, 1962, lent by Allan Stone Gallery
River Boat, oil, 1966, lent by Private Collection, New York
Toy Counter, oil on canvas, 1963, lent by Allan Stone Gallery
Pastry Case, oil on canvas, 1963, lent by Noah Goldowsky,
New York

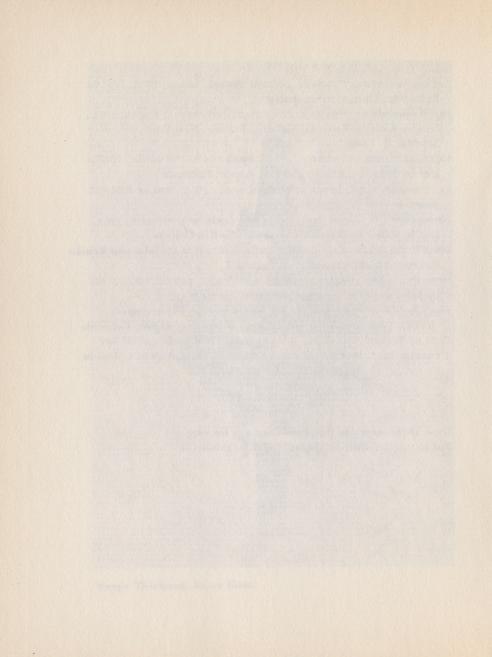


Wayne Thiebaud, River Boat.

### CLAES OLDENBURG

- Falling Shoestring Potatoes, painted canvas, kapok, 1965, lent by Walker Art Center, Minneapolis
- Soft Manhattan #1 (Postal Zones), stenciled canvas, Kapok, 1966, lent by Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York. Gift of Seymour H. Knox
- Soft Giant Drum Set, canvas, vinyl, wood and mixed media, 1967, lent by John and Kimiko Powers, Aspen, Colorado
- Soft Toaster, vinyl, kapok, cloth and wood, 1964, lent by Ellen H. Johnson
- Banana Split II (Paris), watercolor and chalk on pulpboard, 1964, lent by Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College
- Drum Pedal Study, Fall Pedal, pencil, 1967, lent by John and Kimiko Powers, Aspen, Colorado
- Drum Pedal Study, Altered Slingerland, Pedal, pencil, 1967, lent by John and Kimiko Powers, Aspen, Colorado
- Study for Giant Soft Drum Set #1, with Color, pencil and spray enamel, 1967, lent by John and Kimiko Powers, Aspen, Colorado
- Base of Toronto Drainpipe, Monument with Waterfall, pencil and casein, 1967, lent by John and Kimiko Powers, Aspen, Colorado

Some of the works in this exhibition are for sale. For further information please call Extension 331



# OUTDOOR GARDEN COURT SCULPTURE EXHIBITION July 2 - September 15, 1968

#### ALEXANDER CALDER

Little Fountain, steel plate, 1966, lent by Peris Galleries, New York

# JACK KRUEGER

Maybes, lacquered steel tubing, 1968, lent by Leo Castelli Gallery, New York

## ALEXANDER LIBERMAN

Trace, unpainted steel, 1967, lent by Andre Emmerich Gallery, New York

## SEYMOUR LIPTON

Inquisitor, nickel silver on monel metal, 1965, lent by Marlborough-Gerson Gallery, Inc., New York

## ISAMU NOGUCHI

Study for a Waterfall, polished granite, 1961, lent by Cordier and Ekstrom, Inc., New York

Cover, Wayne Thiebaud, Greg.

CMA REF A18 C635P Copya

